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Romania's Defiance

No Soviet bloc nation has been more independent than Romania. Its autonomy was dramatized last summer when the Romanian delegation proudly marched to the cheers of the Olympics crowd in Los Angeles—alone among Russia's allies in refusing to join the boycott.

The maverick responsible for this show of defiance is Nicolae Ceausescu, who has ruled Romania with an iron fist since 1965. Yet many Romanians revere him as an indestructible national asset.

The fact of his mortality, however, has been of increasing interest to the CIA, which has been sending top-secret reports about Ceausescu to President Reagan.

The dispatches coming out of Bucharest indicate that the 67-year-old leader is dying of prostate cancer. According to one classified prediction, he is not expected to live until spring.

The key to White House interest in Ceausescu is found in one paragraph of a top-secret CIA profile: "Although the great powers all play an important part in Ceausescu's thinking, he has been very interested in improving rela-

tions with the United States. He believes Romania, which has an 830-mile border with the USSR, needs powerful friends, if only for the psychological boost they can provide."

This posture also gives him higher approval ratings at home. "Ceausescu enjoys a [great] measure of genuine popular support," the CIA profile says. "His people are highly nationalistic, proud of Romania's continued defiance of the Russians and admire his ability to exploit great-power rivalries to promote Romanian national interests."

Aside from refusing to go along with the Olympic boycott, Ceausescu publicly opposed the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Vietnamese takeover of Cambodia in 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and both Soviet and American development of space weapons.

When Ceausescu took control of the Romanian Communist Party 20 years ago, the Soviets incorrectly assumed he would be a loyal puppet. After all, he had joined the then-illegal party at the age of 14, and he was scarcely out of his teens before he was thrown into jail for eight years and intermittently tortured for his politics.

But Ceausescu shocked the Soviets a mere four years after he came to power by becoming the first post-World War II East European leader to host a U.S. head of state when he received President Richard Nixon in Bucharest.

The following year, he flew to New York for the 25th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. He was later received by presidents Ford and Carter at the White House and once took a two-week tour of the United States.

Ironically, the popularity he has amassed in Bucharest is indirectly the result of his repressive rule. "He has managed to carve out a measure of independence from Moscow, in part, because he has insisted on maintaining a rigid, orthodox communist system at home," the CIA says.

But the old man has been slowing down. Close examination even of touched-up photos in Romanian newspapers show he is deteriorating. He is losing weight and appears tired. He has missed key meetings and even volleyball games, his favorite form of relaxation. The

word in Bucharest is that his wife, Elena, is running the government.

Like most despots, Ceausescu is a nepotist. His wife serves as first deputy prime minister, head of Romania's scientific policy-making body and member of three of the four principal committees of the Romanian Communist Party. One son, Nicu, has already been groomed as his successor. Another son, a daughter, three brothers, a sister and two brothers-in-law have also been given top Romanian honors or positions to ensure a Ceausescu dynasty.

Meanwhile, the CIA predicts, Ceausescu will continue his shrewdly calculated defiance of the Soviets. Conclude the analysts:

"Ceausescu knows that the Soviets will tolerate Romanian recalcitrance only as long as they do not see it as a serious threat. [His] success in following his chosen course is a measure of his ability to judge correctly the limits of Soviet tolerance. In playing this course, he is always running the risk of miscalculation."